

Buried Treasure



Barry Grain, head gardener at
Cholmondeley Castle Gardens
digs deep into the delights of spring
bulbs

Crown Imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*) bring height and seasonal highlights amongst the mixed borders at Cholmondeley

I often think of bulbs as being like that Christmas present you always wanted and got given as a kid, played with for a couple of months and then forgot about. Then every so often when having the annual 'sort out' they re-surface, and you wonder how you ever lived without them.

Bulbs or should I say 'bulbous plants', by their very nature are some of the most adaptable plants in our gardens. Indeed their adaptations that make them able to withstand seasonal hardships, can often lend them to be grown in some of our most challenging borders. Also because most have short seasons and take up very little room it is possible to have a variety of bulbs in flower throughout the year in even the smallest flower bed. The sheer variety of forms alone means that there is more than just a little something for every taste. Many are at their most impressive when planted in larger groups and especially when naturalised in grass, which may not be possible for everyone but even in a small garden good results can be achieved without the mowing nightmare.

One of the things Cholmondeley Castle is known for are its large drifts of bulbs both in grass and in borders. Of particular note in



Cholmondeley Castle is known for its drifts of bulbs. In March and April is Castle Hill which is covered by a great many thousands of the wild Daffodil *N. pseudonarcissus*.

March and April is Castle Hill which is covered by a great many thousands of the wild Daffodil *N. pseudonarcissus*. Tulips are planted annually to improve early interest in the Herbaceous Borders, whilst *Fritillaria imperialis* and species *Lilium* are used to bring height and seasonal highlights amongst our mixed borders.

This past autumn we have added over 8,000 bulbs mostly to our borders and some to grassed areas, something that we intend to continue year on year. 2,000 *Galanthus nivalis*, (Snowdrop), were added to the swathes down

the main drive. And we continue to introduce *Narcissus* to the arboretum, this year in the form of *N. 'Peeping Tom'*, a vibrant early yellow that naturalises well and was one of Lady Cholmondeley's personal favourites. Other good subjects for naturalising in grass are *Crocus*, and we have added another thousand mixed colours to further increase the large group at the bottom end of the Temple Garden by the new species Rose beds. The great thing with both *Crocus* and *Galanthus* in a lawn is that they flower early and the



N. cyclamineus which grows really well at Cholmondeley, and flowers from mid-February onwards and for over two months in some seasons

leaves die back before the grass gets too long and thick, making mowing all the easier. A great Narcissus for this purpose is the tiny *N. cyclamineus* which grows really well at Cholmondeley, and flowers from mid-February onwards and for over two months in some seasons. Their many tiny nodding heads are a real early season treat.

We have introduced 2,000 blue flowered *Anemone blanda* 'Atrocaerulea' to the Glade and Duckery, in challenging beds that are typically dry but have enough spring moisture to support these fabulous plants, which en masse make an incredible feature. Another great early spring introduction is the small but feisty *Puschkinia scilloides* var. *libanotica* which have been threaded throughout the newly renovated section of rockery in the Temple Garden. This is one of my favourite bulbs and looks great when allowed to naturalise in a border, their silver-blue flowers being a real joy.

Our new look Silver Garden amongst the Castle terraces needed an early injection of colour as it doesn't come into its own until late spring, and with bed space being tight bulbs were the obvious solution. Here we have added *Iris reticulata* 'Alida' which produce light blue flowers in February that will look great against the winter silvers. To follow the Iris are the small Narcissus 'Petrel' with creamy white flowers, and for the autumn we have added *Crocus speciosus* 'Conqueror' whose



Hardy Cyclamen are used to under-plant the Hydrangeas in the Duckery

hazy violet-blue will look great amongst the silvers in September and October.

Elsewhere across the garden we have introduced other subjects for seasonal highlights. The curious *Fritillaria acmopetala* along with *Allium christophii* and *A. caeruleum* have been added to the grass beds. Hardy *Cyclamen coum* and *C. hederifolium* are used to under-plant the Hydrangeas in the Duckery. In the Temple Garden delicate species Tulips in the form of *Tulipa tarda* and *T. saxatilis* have been threaded through the rocks and *Camassia quamash* (another personal favourite) give a bold splash of blue to the newly renovated shrub beds. A real highlight of autumn for me are *Colchicum* and at Cholmondeley we have several bold groups across the

garden. For this coming autumn we will have a new and equally impressive group in the Temple Garden, amongst the new species Rose beds. *C. autumnalis* 'Pleniflorum' has been our choice here which show beautiful double rose-pink blooms that are definitely worth waiting all year for, it should look great with the autumn interest in the Roses.

So why wouldn't we plant more and more bulbs in all our gardens? Those named in this article are but a very small taster of what is available, and like most bulbous plants require very little attention, and continue to improve year on year. That gift that keeps on giving. *easy grow*

Cholmondeley Castle is situated near Nantwich, Malpas and Whitchurch between the A41 and A49. Use SY14 8HN for Satnav. You can contact the garden on 01829 720383 for access information.

The castle is not open to the public.